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C O N F I D E N T I A L SHANGHAI 000527

DEPT FOR EAP/CM, AND DRL
NSC FOR LOI, KUCHTA-HEBLING

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR SOCI TINT CH

SUBJECT: HANGZHOU CONTACTS ON INTERNET FREEDOM IN EAST CHINA

REF: A. (A) SHANGHAI 514
 1B. (B) SHANGHAI 448
 1C. (C) SHANGHAI 522
 1D. (D) SHANGHAI 471

CLASSIFIED BY: CHRISTOPHER BEEDE, POL/ECON CHIEF, US CONSULATE SHANGHAI, DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

11. (C) The case of a blogger from Jiangsu Province about to go on trial for libel is being watched closely in East China, according to contacts in neighboring Zhejiang Province. Journalists and intellectuals told Poloff they see internet freedom as a critically important issue, particularly given frequent restrictions on the mainstream media's reporting of "sensitive" local events. The internet facilitates the flow of information to an increasingly politically disaffected and technologically savvy populace in East China, they said. End Summary.

Following the Jia Xiaoyin Case

12. (C) Contacts in Hangzhou, Zhejiang's provincial capital, told Poloff during a December 2-4 visit that they are closely following the case of Jia Xiaoyin, the 23-year-old native of Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, who was arrested in July 2008 for posting an internet blog that commented on the high-profile Yang Jia case. Jia's blog stated that Yang Jia's killings of six police officers on July 1 were justifiable because Shanghai police previously had tortured Yang (Ref A and previous). Jia Xiaoyin has been charged with libel and is awaiting trial, but according to Jia's Shanghai-based lawyer, there is no legal basis for a libel charge against Jia since under Chinese law, a government agency cannot be a victim of libel (Ref B).

13. (C) Zan Aizong, an independent Zhejiang journalist who has his own blog, told Poloff on December 2 that Jia's case is "completely fabricated" by the Shanghai police because of police officers' anger about Jia's blog. The case has other irregularities besides a libel charge with no legal foundation, Zan said, including that the Shanghai Public Security Bureau (PSB) officers who traveled to Suzhou (where Jia Xiaoyin lives) to arrest Jia never notified the Suzhou PSB prior to the arrest despite a requirement to do so. Zan said he has been in touch with Jia's mother, who was prevented by authorities from communicating with her son after his July arrest until mid-October. Tang Zewen, a print journalist for Hangzhou daily newspaper Dushikuabao, said Shanghai authorities ignored the law in Jia's case because they wanted to send a strong signal that with respect to the Yang Jia case, "rumors would not be accepted and commentaries should be controlled."

¶ 14. (C) Many East China netizens are watching Jia's case, Zan said, and the Central Government should be concerned that a guilty verdict would foster more anti-Party sentiment among young people. The Shanghai Municipal Government faces a difficult situation, Zan said, because even if Jia is released, he and other bloggers are likely to become more radicalized by his experience. While Zan believes Jia Xiaoyin will be acquitted, Zhejiang University sociology professor Feng Gang told Poloff on December 4 he is afraid Jia will be found guilty because Jia's blog accusing Shanghai police of torturing Yang Jia was "reckless" and "lacked evidence." Feng said netizens will not be intimidated if Jia is found guilty, though. Despite the case's outcome, the Central Government knows it cannot control the internet, Feng stated.

Internet Freedom Counters Local Media Restrictions

¶ 15. (C) Several contacts said they see internet freedom as a critically important issue, particularly given frequent restrictions on the mainstream media's reporting of "sensitive" local events. Tang Zewen, the Dushikuabao journalist, said he has grown extremely frustrated in recent months with censorship of reporting. For example, Tang said, local Hangzhou media was informed by the CPC Propaganda Department through Xinhua News Agency that newspapers could only use the Xinhua version of an article on the November 15 multi-fatality collapse of a subway construction site in Hangzhou. Independent reports by local media outlets were not allowed. Even worse, Tang said, the August 2008 murder-suicide of the U.S. men's volleyball coach in Beijing by a Hangzhou migrant worker never was reported in the local media because a negative story about a local resident related to the Olympics was "too sensitive."

¶ 16. (C) Tang told Poloff he personally finds the restrictions ridiculous, however, because they primarily target local events. For example, Dushikuabao currently can write unrestricted articles on the taxi driver strikes that have occurred in other Chinese cities, but if taxi drivers ever went on strike in Hangzhou, then local Hangzhou media would be restricted by the Propaganda Department, he said. Residents in East China therefore have realized that the Internet provides more reliable news coverage than the mainstream media, Tang stated.

East China Netizens Growing More Active... and Bold

¶ 17. (C) With more people turning to the internet for news, our contacts said, the internet is facilitating the flow of information to an increasingly politically disaffected and technologically savvy populace in East China. Zhuang Daohe, a Hangzhou-based human rights lawyer, credited the internet with giving people an outlet to discuss on-line the "unfairness" of the Yang Jia murder trial. Ye Hang, an economics professor at Zhejiang University, told Poloff on December 2 that the mainstream media has not adequately covered all instances of social instability related to the current economic downturn (Ref C), but "everyone knows" they can find the information on the internet.

¶ 18. (C) Sociology professor Feng Gang added that many East China bloggers (including himself) are now using their real names instead of netizen IDs. Responding to a question about how police tracked Jia Xiaoyin even though he used a netizen ID (Ref D), Feng, who spoke to Poloff while periodically checking e-mails on his laptop, said he uses his own name when he blogs because "everyone knows who you are." There is no point in registering an on-line name, Feng said, because it's too easy for the authorities to identify netizens. "So I will continue to use my real name," Feng said. "The police know where to find me."